

Coins

Ancient coins provide clues to old ailments

By Roger Boye

CLEOPATRA, the famed queen of ancient Egypt, probably suffered from an enlarged thyroid gland in her neck.

Mithradates II, ruler of Parthia a century before Christ, had a benign tumor below his left eye.

An ancient Greek king, Seleucus I, apparently believed in physical fitness because a muscle in his neck was exceptionally well-developed.

Those are just some of the findings of Dr. Gerald D. Hart, a noted Toronto physician who scrutinized the portraits on dozens of ancient coins.

"By taking a clinical look at the portraits, we can discover some surprising facts about ancient diseases of not just individuals, but whole populations as well," said Hart, a past president of the Ancient Coin Society of Canada. He wrote about his study in Archaeology, a scholarly journal, and

the Numismatist reprinted it.

In the article, Hart pointed out that ancient coins often were designed in such detail that they are as useful as photographs in diagnosing diseases. For example, many old coins — some minted as early as 425 B.C. — depict gods, goddesses, and kings with swollen necks caused by enlarged thyroid glands. That malady was common in parts of the ancient world, suggesting a general lack of iodine in diets.

Hart has identified many other features on ancient coin portraits, including:

- Fat folds in the neck, distinctive of obese and flabby persons.
- Wide, flaring nostrils, which occurs in persons who must labor hard to breathe.
- Nasal deformities caused by a broken nose, and other features suggesting the loss of teeth.